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Institute for Policy Research



Lone mothers, work and depression



About this research

The idea that 'work is good for you' has long been championed by politicians and policy makers. Recent research by the University of Bath suggests that, for lone mothers, paid work that enables them to balance work and childcare responsibilities really does improve their mental well-being. This is particularly where there is flexibility over working hours and no pressure to work more hours than desired. The study carried out by Dr Susan Harkness, in collaboration with Gingerbread (a leading charity supporting single parent families) and funded by the Nuffield Foundation, has shown that being in paid employment is a key factor explaining the fall in lone mother's rates of depression seen in the last decade. This improvement was found only among working lone mothers; for those not in work, mental well-being deteriorated over the same period. This contrasts with the mid-1990s, when work and positive mental health showed little association, with those both in and out of work being at high risk of depression.

Research findings in context and implications for policy

Standing at just over 30 per cent in the mid-2000s, the high rate of depression among lone parents is an important area of policy concern. Although lone mothers remain at greater risk of depression than other groups, the last decade has seen some improvement in their overall mental well-being. Whereas one in three working lone mothers suffered from depression in the mid-1990, a decade later, this had dropped to one-in-five. This improvement was concentrated on those in paid employment, and occurred alongside a sharp rise in the employment rates of lone mothers.

The relationship between work and mental health for mothers in general and lone mothers in particular, has been largely neglected. This research project examined the changing relationship between work and mental health for lone mothers since the early 1990s. Using data from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and a small-scale survey of lone mothers, the study compared the influence of work on the risk of depression among lone mothers to mothers in couples, and explored the factors influencing the relationship between work and depression.

The research found that the significant improvement in lone parents' mental well-being was only seen among those in employment. Among those not in work mental well-being deteriorated over the same period. This finding is in stark contrast to a decade previously, when work and positive mental health showed little association; those in and out of work were both at high risk of depression. However, it is important to note that the job characteristics typically associated with better mental health were found to be less important to lone mothers than other workers. Wage rates, job quality and career prospects appear to matter much less to their mental well-being than having a job which allows them to combine work with childcare responsibilities. Other characteristics of jobs therefore matter much more: including flexibility over working hours and not working longer hours than desired.

This is consistent with previous research findings for unemployed men, which have shown that the non-financial benefits of work - in providing a sense of self identity or self-esteem, for example - are of greater importance to mental well-being than the financial benefits. The evidence from quantitative data is supported by the personal experiences of lone mothers, one of whom said:

Key findings

The research found that:

- For lone mothers, paid work was strongly associated with improved mental health outcomes.
- Specifically, paid work which allowed lone mothers to achieve a satisfactory balance between work and childcare responsibilities mattered most to improvements in their mental well-being (had a much more significant effect on reducing the risk of depression in lone mothers than did earnings).
- Supporting lone mothers to work, and balance work and childcare responsibilities, is therefore important for reasons over and above any financial gains to employment.
- Welfare reforms which merely increase the pressure on lone parents to move into any work, or to work longer hours, may risk pushing up the rate of maternal depression in the coming years.
- Without additional policy measures which help lone mothers balance work and home life, financial incentives designed to encourage longer working hours may not have the desired effect.

"I think being in work gives the parent a confidence boost by being in a different environment and by discussing matters and using a totally different vocabulary and therefore having at least a little bit of your own identity."

However, while not discounting the importance to lone mothers of the financial gains from work, this also raises the possibility that, for this group of parents, financial incentives designed to encourage longer working hours may not necessarily have the intended effect. Without additional policy measures which help working mothers balance work and childcare responsibilities, welfare reforms which increase the pressure on lone parents to move into work, or to work longer hours, may also risk pushing up the rate of maternal depression in the coming years. As one lone mother put it:

"The more my hours went up it got harder and harder to manage"

Methodology

The research was carried out in 2012 and used data from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) to examine the changing relationship between work and mental health for lone mothers at two periods of time, from 1993 to 1998 and from 2003 to 2008. The BHPS contains over 8,000 observations each year and includes around 400 families headed by lone mothers. Using the General Health Questionnaire, a tool commonly used by psychologists to identify those at high risk of depression, the quantitative analysis examined the influence of work on the risk of depression, comparing lone mothers to mothers in couples. Data analysis was complemented by a small-scale qualitative survey of 20 lone mothers who had some experience of poor mental health. The aim of this survey was to provide a more up to date and richer understanding of the factors influencing the complex relationship between work and depression among lone mothers, particularly in light of a changed policy and economic environment since 2008.



Key policy message:

The most consistent and important factor influencing the extent of depression among lone mothers is whether they are working the desired number of hours. It is paid work which allows lone mothers to achieve a satisfactory balance between work and family life that matters most to improvements in their mental well-being. Given these findings it is likely that welfare reforms which merely increase pressure on lone mothers to move into work, or to work longer hours than desired, will risk pushing up further the rate of maternal depression.

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More on this research:

The research was funded by the Nuffield Foundation and conducted in 2012. The Nuffield Foundation is an endowed charitable trust that aims to improve social well-being in the widest sense. It funds research and innovation in education and social policy and also works to build capacity in education, science and social science research. The Nuffield Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. More information is available at www.nuffieldfoundation.org

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